

History Highlights

It was the largest naval bombardment and land-sea battle fought in any war up to that time. The outcome of the six-hour battle contributed significantly to the end of the long and bitter struggle of the Civil War. And, this historic event took place at Fort Fisher.

The city of Wilmington on the Cape Fear River was an important port of entry for the Confederacy during the Civil War and by late 1864, it was the last southern port open to trade. Fort Fisher, built in 1861, served to protect this valuable port from Union ships. In 1864, the first of two Union attacks on Fort Fisher took place. The fort held strong during the first battle and Union forces withdrew, but the Confederacy was not so fortunate the next time.

In early 1865, a fleet of 56 ships bombarded the fort prior to a land assault by a force of more than 3,300 infantry. Fort Fisher was captured and the Confederate supply line was broken. Approximately three months after the fall of Fort Fisher, the Civil War came to an end.



Swimming

More than seven miles of beach provide all of the sun, sand, sea and sky you can soak up in a day. Experience the ocean away from the crowds. Walk along one of the few remaining undeveloped stretches of shoreline on our southern coast.

From the recreation area parking lot, an elevated boardwalk leads over the sand dunes to the beach. The adjacent visitor center includes a refreshment stand that is open during summer months, the park office, nature exhibits and restrooms. Lifeguard service is provided in a designated ocean swimming area from Memorial Day to Labor Day.



Fishing

Common ocean catches include bluefish, puppy drum and Virginia mullet. Spot and flounder share the estuary with numerous shellfish.

Hiking

Explore Fort Fisher State Recreation Area by foot. A short trail meanders through the marsh, allowing hikers a chance to view sound-side flora and fauna.

Off-Road Vehicles

For people wishing to fish, sunbathe or study nature in the southern portions of the park, four-wheel-drive vehicles are allowed to operate along the beach within a limited corridor. Drivers must follow designated routes, avoiding dunes, vegetation and marked nesting areas. Only registered motor vehicles are allowed on the four-wheel-drive beach access (no ATV's). Exercise caution. Portions of the access may flood at high tides. Soft sand and sharp drop-offs are common.



Nature's Classroom

Rangers hold regularly scheduled educational and interpretive programs about Fort Fisher State Recreation Area. Program titles include Shell Stroll, Turtle Talk, Salt Marsh Exploration,



Bird Hike and Surf Fishing Basics. Contact the park office to arrange a special exploration of Fort Fisher State Recreation Area for your group or class.

Educational materials about Fort Fisher State Recreation Area have been developed for grades 4-6 and are correlated to North Carolina's competency-based curriculum in science, social studies, mathematics and English/language arts.

The Fort Fisher State Recreation Area program introduces students to the habitat and life history of colonial-nesting coastal birds. The program also focuses on endangered, threatened and special-concern bird species. Accompanying the program is a teacher's booklet and workshop, free of charge to educators.

Flora and Fauna

It would be difficult to find an area on the North Carolina coast with a greater variety of maritime habitats than Fort Fisher. The ocean teems with life, from microscopic plankton to fishermen's favorites — king and Spanish mackerel, striped and channel bass and the great blue marlin. Closer to shore, spot an Atlantic bottlenose dolphin just beyond the breakers or follow the flight of the brown pelican as he skims over the ocean waves.

One of the most interesting animals found at Fort Fisher is the loggerhead sea turtle. The loggerhead uses the isolated beach as a nesting habitat, coming ashore to deposit eggs in the warm sand. Weighing from 150 to 300 pounds, the female nests every three or four years, laying up to five nests a year. Each nest may contain as many as 120 eggs. After a two-month incubation, the hatchlings emerge from the nest and race to the sea. The loggerhead sea turtle is included on the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Species. Those who disturb or harm turtles, nests or hatchlings are subject to penalties.

The sandbars and intertidal pools found in the narrow zone between land and sea are a diverse and productive arena for living creatures. Low tide brings tidal pools that delight shell-seekers of all ages with such treasures as sea stars, tulip shells and keyhole urchins.

Brown pelicans, terns and seagulls, including the great black-backed gull, soar above the dunes in all seasons. Double-crested cormorants, gannets and loons flock to the area in winter.

The northern portion of the park is occupied by a remnant maritime forest of live oak and yaupon. Near the ocean, these salt-tolerant trees are shaped by wind and sea spray and grow no more than 20 to 30 feet in height.

Farther south, an evergreen shrub thicket runs along the main road. Yaupon, wax myrtle, groundsel tree and greenbrier populate the area. These natural brambles provide hiding places for raccoons, opossums, foxes and rabbits.

The look of the land at Fort Fisher constantly changes. Hurricanes and strong storms along the coast can erode dunes, washing away in hours what took years to accumulate or filling inlets that were once deep waters. Sea oats, panic grass, seashore elder and other plants that are tolerant to the sand, wind and salt spray help to build and stabilize new dunes. Granules of windblown sand are trapped by stems and branches. The sand piles up around the base of the plants. Over days, weeks and years, these piles of sand can grow into large dunes.

The bare sand and sparsely vegetated areas between and behind the dunes are a nesting habitat for colonial water birds, including black skimmers and terns that deposit their eggs in shallow depressions in the sand. In order to protect their exposed nests, these birds seek safety in colonies ranging in size from a few pairs to several thousand pairs.

The endangered piping plover — a species whose Atlantic population is less than 1,400 pairs — nests at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area. Resembling a sandpiper, the piping plover is a small, camouflaged bird that blends with the pale, sandy ground. Even the bird's eggs are camouflaged and can go undetected until stepped upon.

Although the bird was once common in the 19th century, the piping plover all but disappeared after the turn of the century due to excessive hunting for the millinery trade. The species made a comeback in the 1940s due to a migratory bird protection act, but the species again declined, this time due to the recent increased development and recreational use of beaches. Nesting areas at Fort Fisher are posted to provide sanctuary from human and pet intrusion, which can cause nesting parents to desert the nest and expose the eggs or their young to the sun and predators.

To help the plover and other nesting birds, respect the roped-off nesting areas. Do not approach or linger near the birds or their nests. Keep your pets leashed as they, too, can destroy nests. Also, don't leave or bury trash or food scraps on the beach because the trash can attract predators.

The estuary's tidal creeks attract seafood lovers as well as fish-eating birds. An assortment of herons, ibises and diving ducks compete with human fishermen in search of flounder, spot, mullet, crab, mussels and clams. Other birds, including osprey, oyster catcher and willet, enjoy nearby sandbars. Mud flats in the estuary are also great for bird watching, especially at low tide when whimbrels, dowitchers, dunlins and sandpipers swarm the area in search of food.

Extensive salt marshes border the west side of the island. These habitats are among the most productive on earth and supply vital nutrients to life in nearby creeks, bays and ocean waters. In the water, cordgrass shelters the larvae of fish and shellfish while, closer to land, black needlerush provides cover. Wildflowers in the marsh include sea-oxeye, sea lavender and salt marsh mallow. Northern harriers and other soaring birds take advantage of the marsh's open spaces to find and feed upon small rodents.



Rules & Regulations

Some of our rules are posted throughout the park. A complete list is available at the park office. Help preserve our natural resources by observing the following:

- ☐ The removal or disturbance of any plant, animal or mineral is prohibited.
- ☐ Hunting and trapping are not allowed.

- ☐ Loggerhead sea turtles are protected by law. Anyone who harms the turtles, nests or hatchlings is subject to penalties. Due to turtle and bird nesting habits, the four wheel drive beach access is closed at night from March 15 to Sept. 14.

- ☐ Fishing is permitted. Regulations of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission apply.
- ☐ Driving on the dunes or over vegetation is prohibited. The speed limit for four-wheel-drive vehicles is 15 miles per hour.
- ☐ Do not enter marked nesting sites on foot or by vehicle.
- ☐ Horses are not permitted in the park.

- ☐ Do not litter. Throw trash in proper receptacles. Sea turtles may ingest plastic bags, mistaking them for food. Shore birds may become entangled in discarded fishing line.

- ☐ Open fires, firearms and fireworks are prohibited.

- ☐ The possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages is prohibited.

- ☐ North Carolina motor vehicle and traffic laws apply in the park.

- ☐ Pets must be on a leash no longer than six feet. Pets are not allowed in the changing facility or swimming areas.

- ☐ Camping is not permitted at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area.

For Your Safety

To prevent accidents, please remember these safety tips.

- ☐ Do not feed or approach wildlife. North Carolina is experiencing a rise in rabies cases. Report sick or aggressive animals to a ranger.

- ☐ Sharp drop-offs, strong currents and jellyfish may create hazardous swimming conditions.

- ☐ Watch the weather. Be alert to approaching storms and seek shelter.

- ☐ Four-wheel-drive roads may flood. Observe rising tides. Extreme care must be taken while driving in soft sand. State-owned vehicles are not permitted to tow stuck vehicles.

- ☐ It is recommended that you swim only in the designated swimming area.

- ☐ Prolonged exposure to heat, wind and sunlight may cause sunburn, sun poisoning and/or dehydration. Use sun protection and drink plenty of fluids.

Contact park staff for other safety tips or for an explanation of park rules.